



Six Common Key Control Mistakes Campus Housing Officers Make

Many campus housing officers face security issues that raise liability concerns regarding the protection of campus housing officers. Unfortunately, many of the key security practices housing officers follow do not provide adequate key control. While some campuses use an automated key management system, others depend upon traditional key storage methods like hanging keys on pegboards or placing them in cabinets and drawers. This paper will address six common key control mistakes that property owners make when implementing a key management system.



One night at a university in Texas, a student was awakened by the sound of her apartment door opening. As she would later discover, a former desk assistant had used a master key to enter her apartment, along with two others, that night.*

Fortunately, the intruder fled when the student screamed for help, but that's not always how scenarios like this end.

Lack of proper key control is a huge risk, considering that your university might not be able to perform background checks on every person — especially contractors — to whom you issue a key. To reduce your risk, campus housing officers should avoid making the following six key control mistakes.

1. Storing Keys in an Unsecure Area

Many campuses store keys in a desk drawer or hang them from a pegboard. While this method allows for easy access to keys, it also leaves students vulnerable to theft. With such limited key security, imagine how easy it is for a potential criminal to walk into a dorm, select a key and gain entry into a student's room.

In the same way that campuses have a responsibility to provide adequate door locks for students, they must secure the keys that open students' doors. The best way for housing officers to protect their tenants is to purchase a system that enables them to both control and track keys. They should store keys in a secure, locked area to prevent unauthorized access or forced entry. Ideally, keys should be located in a tamper-proof drawer or wall-mounted panel that only users with proper access rights can access.

2. Labeling Keys

The practice of labeling keys with unit numbers does a disservice to students. If someone drops or misplaces a labeled key, anyone who finds that key can identify which dorm room or apartment the key belongs to. Instead, it is recommended that housing officers purchase an electronic key control system that automatically tracks keys, allowing employees to log in to the system and quickly locate keys without having to depend on labels.

3. Failing to Factor in Human Error

Key control methods that don't account for human error when tracking keys are unreliable. Some key security systems only track keys accurately if, when returning keys, users put them in the same slot they were taken from. If one key is placed in an incorrect slot, then the next user, finding the correct key return slot occupied, will place their key in a wrong slot as well. Eventually, the housing officer will have to reorganize all the keys because of one person's error.

The system might also require users to scan the keys after removing them. What if, when checking out a key, a user takes an extra key or a key falls to the floor without being scanned? Because the misplaced key was never scanned, the system will not record that the key has been removed.

It is vital that housing officers choose a key control system that is not dependent upon its users to properly track keys. A key system should allow users to return keys to any slot and track when an unauthorized key has been taken. This will not only cut down on the time it takes employees to return keys but also prevent liability through the creation of a verifiable audit trail.

4. Not Taking Advantage of Online Reports and Mobile Alerts

Housing officers cannot always remain at their office to monitor key transactions. Some key control systems offer additional features that allow administrators to set up web access to view reports and perform administrative functions or to receive email and text alerts while they are away from the key control system.

With online system access, the system administrators can view detailed reporting, such as work order status and key transaction history, as well as make adjustments to user access privileges. The email and text alert option notifies system administrators of system misuse, when an unauthorized key is taken, if a key is returned by a user other than the one who checked it out, or if keys are not returned within their assigned time frame.

5. Limiting System Expansion and Technology Developments

When choosing a key control system, housing officers will have to determine how many key slots they need to store their keys. A common mistake they make when choosing a system is not planning for expansion to accommodate more keys. Some key control system providers will require their customers to purchase a secondary system if their customers need more key storage space. Housing officers should plan ahead and choose a company that offers customizable options for additional storage without having to purchase a secondary system.

Housing officers should also avoid purchasing a system that will be outdated within a few years. As businesses grow, it is important that they keep pace with technological developments. Looking for a key control company that has a history of expanding software capabilities can help campuses keep pace with advancing technology.

6. Selecting a Vendor That Doesn't Fit a Campus's Needs

Before purchasing a key system, housing officers should research several key factors in addition to providers' product offerings to determine if the partnership will meet the campus's needs. The first factor to consider is how long a vendor has been providing key management solutions. Longevity is a good indication of stability and reliability, so finding a company with a proven track record, an established name in the industry and a history of providing software upgrades to keep their systems current are signs that the company will be a beneficial long-term partner.

Housing officers should also determine the types of system installation services and hardware and software support they will need. Some vendors will come on-site and install systems for their customers and provide the option to have support available 24/7. Others require their customers to install the system themselves and only have a 9-to-5 support line. Key control systems contain keys and assets housing officers and their staff need for everyday tasks, and the ability to reach a support team at any time will minimize a complex's downtime in the event of a system malfunction.

Housing officers should also ask themselves whether they would like the vendor they partner with to be a single-source provider or one that has third-party representation. While using third parties for sales and support services allows vendors to cut costs by outsourcing resources, this business structure could affect customers when they need to contact the provider to request routine maintenance, receive hardware and software support, or order supplies.

Finding a company that designs, sells, installs and supports its key control systems completely in-house can be convenient for its clients because it eliminates the hassle of going through multiple parties for support.



Key Control Best Practices to Remember

- Store keys in a locked, secure drawer or wall-mounted unit.
- Never label keys with unit numbers or addresses.
- Select a system that automatically tracks keys.
- Choose a system that factors in human error.
- Take advantage of remote system access and alert features.
- Allow for key storage expansion and software updates without purchasing a new or additional system.
- Fully research and partner with a vendor that meets the property's needs.

Housing officers should choose wisely when purchasing a key control system. It should be reliable, efficient and customizable based on the campus's needs. When a housing officer engages in secure key control practices, they not only help prevent unauthorized people from gaining access to students' keys but also limit their liability risks.

* "Arrest of desk assistant prompts changes in Housing and Residential Life hiring," TCU 360, 2018 • <https://www.tcu360.com/2018/02/grandmarc-desk-assistant-arrested-for-breaking-into-apartments-with-master-key/>



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200 Quality Circle, College Station, TX 77845
866.541.7000 • keytrak.com

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